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ABSTRACT

First language and second language learners have to learn through making mistakes. Foreign language learners do not have to learn, to anything like the same extent, in this way. Foreign language teachers should study students' mistakes in order better to understand how they are learning and mislearning. Teachers should try to avoid language teaching procedures which appear likely to cause students to make mistakes. If, however, the teacher is too strict about mistakes, learners will not be bold in use of the language and their progress will be retarded. There are times for controlled and correct use of the language and times for adventurous use. Mistakes are not to be encouraged, but sometimes they should not be strongly discouraged. (Author/DB)

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Summary

W.R.Lee: Encouraging and Discouraging Mistakes

In first-language learning, mistakes are inevitable. The young learner's attention is exploratory and selective: he tries to make grammatical as well as other sense of all the language that comes his way. The learning is unplanned and we cannot be sure which factors in the first-language learning situation promote success and which delay it. To some extent the same applies to second-language learning (e.g. that of immigrants). The language comes at the child chaotic-ally and he has to make what he can of it, although he does not 'make mistakes' all the time.

Research supports the view that first-language and second-language learners' 'approximative systems' develop similarly. At present there is little evidence to suggest that this is true also of the foreign-language learner, regardless of the teaching procedures and materials used.

[The writer distinguishes between various teacher attitudes towards mistakes.] If it is mainly through error that foreign-language learning takes place, then procedures leading to error should be preferred. For various reasons mistakes are made, but the teaching of mistakes (sometimes advocated) seems unjustifiable. Study of mistakes can be useful as a way of discovering what learners' difficulties are.

If, however, the teacher is too strict about mistakes, learners will not be bold in use of the language, and their progress will be retarded. There are times for controlled and correct use and times for adventurous use. Mistakes are not to be encouraged, but sometimes they should not be strongly discouraged.

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Encouraging and Discouraging Mistakes(1)

As far as foreign-language teaching and learning are concerned, the traditional view (but perhaps we should not use the emotive word 'traditional') is that mistakes are something the learner should try not to make and the teacher should do his best to prevent the learner from making. Is this still the prevailing view today? I suppose it is. Yet it has often been seriously questioned, and a new orthodoxy(is this again an emotive word?) has, I think, been taking root, in contradiction to the old: namely, that we learn a foreign language, to put it crudely, through making mistakes rather than through avoiding mistakes. In this paper we shall be taking a look at some of the implications of this view and asking to what extent, if at all, such a view has to be accepted.

Learning of the mother tongue, from the cradle onwards, is without doubt far from error-free: on the contrary, it is beset by error, and it is hard to see how it could be otherwise, since the young child meets with the spoken language in its fullness - with an extremely large vocabulary, a wide range of complicated syntax, differences of pronunciation and of styles of pronunciation, even (in many environments of learning) with considerably variety of register - and all this coming not only from the various age-levels within the family but from visiting relative and friends and also perhaps (and daily hours of it) from the radio and TV. The young learner does not pay close attention to all this language, and doubtless survives partly because of an inbuilt capacity to switch off his attention, which is both exploratory and selective. But although, very gradually, and as a result of strong motivation combined with richness of opportunity, he finds (or feels that he has found) the threads which lead him to discover linguistic patterns in the complication, it is not without frequently being misled and confused. Studies made in recent years(2) have shown that young children acquiring their first language do not merely produce imitations, perfect or imperfect, of adults or older children: they are also trying to make grammatical sense out of the linguistic data that come their way, trying indeed to construct a grammar which will not let them down in the face of further linguistic experience. But they find that it does let them down from time to time, and so from time to time they revise it (having, one may guess, a deep-set will to conform, or perhaps simply a wish to be readily understood) until slowly it begins to approximate to the grammar in daily unconscious use in the community which they have entered.

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All this is in the very nature of first-language learning situations, which are rarely more than slightly contrived. We do not and cannot contrive for the young child to meet with a minimal first-language vocabulary, with a narrow range of syntax, with one style only of pronunciation, with a single register of spoken English. Even professional linguists do not draw up a syllabus of instruction for their tender offspring (such and such syntax and vocabulary this month, such and such next month, and so on) but leave the matter very much to chance, at least during early childhood. They could hardly do anything else.

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(1) This article is a modified version of a paper given at the second overseas conference of the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL), held, jointly with the Association des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes, at St. Malo in January 1976.

(2) [illegible] by R. Brown and U. Bellugi.

Can we therefore say that the matter should be left to chance in the foreign-language learning situation? I think not, partly because we do not know with any certainty which are the factors in the first-language learning situation that promote success. We may speculate about it, and doubtless we can be fairly sure that strong motivation is one of them - the learner must learn the language or he is unable, in any full sense, to live in the community to which he belongs. This is a language-advancing factor, as I have called it, but we cannot be equally sure that being exposed unsystematically to a great mass and variety of language is also an unmitigated blessing: this may for all we know be a language-delaying(1) factor, balanced out by the advantages of some or all of the other factors involved; or it may be in some way language-advancing (since there is generous provision of models, meaningful repetition, and adequate opportunity for use) and in some way language-delaying (since there are many distractors and deceiving clues, much that seems meaningless, and much in what is heard that is plain boring).

We cannot do much about the first-language learning situation, and we do not try to. But the foreign-language learning situation (as distinct from the second-language learning situation, of which immigrant situations are a special example) is partly, and perhaps largely, under control. Choices are open to us, For example, we can choose whether to present a lot of vocabulary in a short time or not, whether to present several registers of speech in the first year of learning or not, whether to introduce several uses of one tense-form simultaneously or not, and so on. We can and do exercise a lot of choice. In some ways we must, since we are usually unable to create in the classroom a linguistic environment which resembles

at all closely the first-language learning environment: for one thing, the school is generally closed in the evenings and at weekends; for another the learners do not (unless on school visits abroad) witness a whole community using the language for everyday purposes; for another, we may not be native or even very advanced and fluent speakers of the language concerned; and above all, there is already a language with which (at least in linguistically homogeneous groups) the learners can communicate. And there are several other big differences between the first-language and foreign-language situations.

In the first-language learning situation mistakes are clearly inevitable, if only because of the quantity and complexity of language which comes the learner's way within a short space of time. It is often said that it is through making mistakes (as a result of trying out provisional hypotheses as to the way the language works) that the young child gains an oral command of the mother tongue. To be wholly accurate one should add that learning only takes place if the mistakes are corrected; otherwise, presumably, they remain. Correction may take various forms and come from various people. Immediate correction may take the form of expanding the utterance(2). Correction may also be self-correction, consequent on hearing the accepted form in use; but the correct form may be ignored (or adopted temporarily and then discarded for a time) if the child finds difficulty in giving it a place in his developing mental scheme,

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(1) For the use of these two terms, see W.R. Lee, 'Language, "Experience", and the Language Learner', in English Language Teaching XXVII,3, 1973, p.242.

(2) See, for instance, R. Brown's A First Language: the Early Stages Allen and Unwin, 1974, p.105

his evolving personal grammar.(1). Correction is occasionally long delayed. (I remember, as a young child, repeatedly using the word /maizld/ for misled/misled/ although this was after I had started reading. Nobody appeared to notice the mistake, which remained with me for several years. I mention it as an odd instance of the error-and-correction process, of which the young child makes use for a large part of his learning time.)(2).

Error-making in the first-language learning situation is a direct consequence, it seems, of the falsity of some of the young learner's hypotheses as to the nature of the linguistic forms and usages of that part of the language he has met with and of wrong assumptions concerning the circumstances in which they can be used. In simpler language, it is the result of guessing, although not of haphazard guessing, since the guesser actively strives after the system and structure which he feels is to be found. In the absence of simplification and of systematic guidance (although some mothers - for instance, by repeating and modifying some of the baby's utterances - supply a modicum of these), it seems inevitable that such guessing or 'hypothesising' should be on a considerable scale. Observation of it has already contributed so much to an understanding of how a first language is acquired that further detailed study of the phenomenon in a wider variety of circumstances seems desirable. One cannot imagine a first-language situation in which this kind of pattern-seeking guesswork would not play an essential role.

The same clearly applies (at least to some considerable extent) to the second-language learning situation: for instance, to that of immigrants and of the children of professional workers temporarily resident abroad. Although there may be some language-teaching guidance within the school, particularly if special classes are organised, there is often lavish, unsystematised, and miscellaneous experience of the second language between classes and in the playground and outside the school altogether. Thus in large measure the second-language learner may enjoy the advantages and disadvantages that characterise a first-language learning situation.

Of course, many teachers would also regard mistakes as inevitable in a foreign-language learning situation. They usually mean that, however carefully they may teach, mistakes will occur. But the causes of such mistakes, it seems, are not altogether the same as of those made in the first-language learning situation. They may of course result from the learners being 'given' too much of the language at a time for them to cope with enjoyably and with any success, or from confused and chaotic presentation, but this is much less likely to be so than in any first-language situation, since the supply of language is controlled (adequately or inadequately) and there is an attempt at least at some manner of orderly presentation. The foreign-language learner too, like the first-language and the second-language learner, inevitably makes a number of wrong assumptions about the language, and these are corrected - in oral activity often at once, in written activity often after a considerable delay. Some of this correction may be self-correction, as when the learner notices in speech or print that what he has said or written is deviant. In the foreign-language learning situation, mistakes may also arise from the teacher's imperfect command of the

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(1) By 'correct' form or usage I mean (in this paper) the form or usage which prevails and is normal in the community the child belongs to.

(2) This is not what the young child is doing, however, between full wakefulness and sleep, when it seems that a kind of do-it-yourself substitution practice comes into play. See Ruth Weir's Language in the Crib (Mouton, Janua Linguarum, Series Maior, XIV, 1962).

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language, flaws in the teaching material, lack of adequate and meaningful repetition, shortcomings of memory, and so on.

There is fairly solid evidence now that second-language learners (e.g. immigrants) make some of the same types of mistake as first-language learners, at least if the language is English,(1) and that second-language and first-language learners' 'approximative systems' (to use W. Nemser's term) develop in roughly the same way.(2) This fact should have a beneficial influence on second-language-learning syllabuses, and teaching materials, which in due course can be shaped to take account of such tendencies and lines of linguistic development. The evidence is very much thinner as far as the foreign-language situation is concerned, and more investigation is needed. If it could be shown that - regardless of the teaching approach and of teaching procedures, regardless also of the nature and content of the teaching materials, of the incidence of lessons, of the teacher's skill, and of other highly variable factors in the learning situation - foreign-language learners make

the same grammatical types of mistake as first-language learners, and in the same sequence, then this indeed might be evidence of innate language-learning strategies which come into play whether the language being learnt is the first one or not and whether it is in daily use in the learner's environment or not. It is not at all clear that such evidence (true of foreign-language learning situations as distinct from second-language learning situations) is at present available, nor that it is likely to be. But if it were available, then obviously there should be some application to the making of syllabuses and teaching materials, which should be designed not to go against the grain of the learner's sequential language-learning strategies but on the contrary to harmonise with them and so help the learner to deploy them with maximum success: in other words, the sequencing of linguistic features (especially of syntactic features) in syllabuses and teaching materials would follow the lines that any foreign-language learners - however taught - follow in learning the language. The snag is that no such lines have yet been revealed, except for the first-language and to some extent the second-language (e.g. immigrant) learning situations. Further observation in detail of how learners learn in a variety of foreign-language learning situations may possibly show that they learn to some extent in a similar way, by making false hypotheses which are successively revised as the mistakes they lead to are perceived to be mistakes. But this is no more than speculation.

What attitude should the language-teacher and the materials-writer take towards mistakes? We cannot reasonably sidetrack this question and pretend that it does not exist, or fail to make up our minds. There is the possibility of mistakes on the one hand and the fact of mistakes on the other. To what extent are our teaching procedures and materials likely to cause mistakes, and need we (in view of recent research) worry much if they do? And once mistakes have been made, what then? Are we to clap our hands with joy, and leave the learners to sort them out? Should we penalise the learner in some way? Should we revise our teaching procedures or materials? These are practical questions to which answers have to be given.

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(1) A useful summary of part of this evidence is to be found in "Errors and Strategies in Child Second-Language Acquisition", by Heidi C. Dulay and Marina K. Burt, in TESOL Quarterly 8,2,June 1974. See also Pt.3 of Error Analysis: Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition. ed by J.C. Richards,Longman,1974, and Section 6 of S.P. Corder's 'Error Analysis, Interlanguage, and Second Language Acquisition', in Language Teaching and Linguistics: Abstracts 8,4, October 1975 Cambridge University Press.

(2) W. Nemser, 'Approximative Systems of Foreign Language Learners' in IRAL. IX,2, May 1971; reprinted in Error Analysis, ed. Richards, Longman 1974.

Among the various possible teacher attitudes here are the following:

1) Mistakes are so valuable as a means of language learning that the more of them we have the better. We therefore take no care to choose procedures and materials which minimise the probability of mistakes.

2) Mistakes are liable to stick in the learners' minds, and so if possible should not be made. We should thus take care to choose teaching procedures and materials which at least do not encourage mistakes. Moreover, the learner might as well 'get it right' the first time if he can, without taking the indirect path via mistakes.

3) Mistakes are unavoidable, although undesirable. Let us study them, in particular instances, as evidence of what the learners find difficult and of what they are trying to do; and let us take remedial action.

4) Mistakes can only be avoided altogether if we are so strict in our teaching procedures that the learners are nervous and unadventurous in using the language because they fear the condemnation or mockery that goes with the making of mistakes. Thus their language-using ability is not stretched and they do not discover how much they can already say and understand.

I would like to enlarge on the last-mentioned attitude particularly, but first let me comment on the other three. They are not mutually exclusive attitudes; nor perhaps do they exhaust the possibilities.

Firstly, the more mistakes there are the better we should be pleased. On the face of it this is an absurd attitude, yet it has its supporters. A. Valdmann, for instance, proposes the teaching of forms which are normally regarded as incorrect(1). V.J. Cook says: "If the second-language learner is to proceed by a series of makeshift hypotheses, he ... must be allowed great freedom to err ... so that he can tests his hypotheses and abandon those that are unsuccessful." Cook lists a number of requirements which "a method for teaching foreign languages that could justifiably claim to be based on first-language acquisition would have to meet"; among them that "it would permit, and indeed encourage, (2) the learner to produce sentences that are ungrammatical..."(3) But how far are we to go? The logic of the position seems inescapable: if it is only or even mainly through error that language-learning takes place, then procedures and materials that lead to error should be preferred.

I am not suggesting that this is a reductio ad absurdum of the whole argument, but at least it should give us pause and prompt us to ask where we are being led. According to J.C. Richards, who takes issue with me for suggesting that 'one of the teacher's aims should be to prevent mistakes from occurring', such an approach cannot be

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(1) Cf. 'Error analysis and pedagogical ordering', in Linguistic insights in applied linguistics, ed. Corder and Roulet (AIMAV, Brussels; Didier, Paris)

(2) My italics - WRL

(3) Cf. 'The analogy between first and second language learning' in IRAL, 7, 1969.

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reconciled 'with what we know or can observe about language learning. Children do not themselves acquire language by correctly imitating sentences they hear. (1). Richards assumes here that what is true of first-language learning is true of foreign-language learning too, and fails to distinguish between the two types of situation.

Furthermore, neither first-language learners nor second-language learners (e.g. immigrants) make mistakes all the time. They do not produce nothing but deviant forms and usages; indeed, it is not even certain that most of their own speech is deviant, except possibly for that of first-language learners at a very early age indeed (during babyhood). Only if first-language or second-language learners learned wholly or mainly via mistakes would we perhaps be justified in deciding that a foreign language could be learnt only in that way.

It is unfortunate that the term 'second language' is variously (and sometimes loosely) employed, to signify either 'any language which is learnt after one's first language, whenever one learns it', or 'any language, other than one's first, which is learnt in an environment where it is commonly spoken'.

In this article the term 'second language' has the latter significance, whereas in very many studies of language learning it has the former. It is important to realise that most if not all of the investigations which show that learners made use of the same error-making and error-correcting strategies as in the first-language situation are concerned with learners living in a country where the language they are learning is spoken by the vast majority of people in their learning environment. This is true not only of the learners studied by Dulay and Burt, but also of the studies they refer to - for instance, that by Ravem of the English-learning of Norwegian children in the United States, and that by Milon of a Japanese boy learning English in Hawaii.(2) The same is true of Dato's observations of American children learning Spanish in Madrid(3)

and other studies of this kind. Pit Corder points out that "the circumstances in which they have learned the second language have generally been informal". (4) The informality was such that the learners had to make what they could of a relatively chaotic experience of the language, as in a first-language learning situation. There is no necessary application of this research to a foreign-language learning situation, yet unfortunately the application is sometimes made.

As for the view that mistakes should be avoided if possible, since they tend to lodge in the learners' minds, this is of course inapplicable to first-language learning, since mistakes are

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(1) Cf. 'Error analysis and second language strategies' in Focus on the Learner ed. Oller and Richards, 1973.

(2) Cf. 'Errors and strategies in child second-language acquisition', by Heidi C. Dulay and Marina K. Burt, and 'The development of negation in English by a second language learner', by John P. Milon, both in TESOL Quarterly 8,2, 1974.

(3) Cf. D.P. Dato's 'The development of the Spanish verb phrase in children's second language learning' in The Psychology of Second Language Learning, ed. Pimsleur and Quinn (C.U.P. 1972)

(4) Op.cit, p.26

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inevitable as a result of the general character of that learning situation, and it is largely inapplicable to second-language learning for the same reason. However, it is not at all obvious that it is inapplicable to the foreign-language learning situation. Nevertheless we know from experience that mistakes always do occur, and that many of them are the result of interference coming from those parts of the foreign language which the learners have already met with(1). The learner over-generalises from his foreign-language experience i.e. he constructs and perpetually changes his own personal grammar, and perhaps does so at times in somewhat the same way as a first-language or second-language learner. But this in no way justifies the teaching of incorrect forms. First-language and second-language learners have to learn, in part, through mistakes, because the learning situations are beyond control. The foreign-language learner does not have to learn in this way, at least to anything like the same extent; and in any case there is little chance of transforming a foreign-language learning situation to bring about a close resemblance to a first-language or second-language learning situation, even if it were desirable to do so.

As S. Pit Corder has argued, (2), study of foreign-language learners' mistakes can be useful in showing what their difficulties are and what they are trying to do with the language at a particular stage in learning it, and can provide the teacher with guidance for remedial action.

If there is no sound reason for teaching mistakes - and thus for adopting procedures and materials likely to produce mistakes - we can only take the line that as far as possible, in the foreign-language classroom, mistakes should be avoided; it is impossible to sit on the fence and say that one should both seek and not seek to avoid such procedures and materials.

One other important consideration should, however, be borne in mind, and this concerns the effect on the learners of too strict a policy on the teacher's part about mistakes. To be deprived of freedom to experiment with the language in an attempt to say what one wants to say can only stupefy and kill interest. On the contrary, encouragement of adventurous use of what has been acquired, without worrying overmuch about mistakes, helps to keep interest alive. In striking out boldly, the learner may also learn more about what he can and cannot do with the language. Here we have, if you like, a 'psychological' as well as a 'linguistic' argument, based on the assumption that motivation is an essential driving-force.

It is unnecessary to suggest that the foreign-language teacher should take off the controls altogether. Without arguing the case here, I would think there should be times for strict supervision, with the aim of ensuring wholly correct use, and times when the learners understand that something quite different and more adventurous is open to them; and the path of adventure will be

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(1) There is now considerable evidence that a very high proportion of errors are due to this type of interference rather than to interference from the first language. Cf. particularly L. Dušková's 'On sources of errors in foreign languages' IRAL,7,11-36, and 'You can't learn without goofing', by Heidi C. Dulay and Marina K. Burt, in Error analysis, ed. J. Richards, Longman, 1974. Also W.R. Lee's 'Thoughts on contrastive linguistics in the context of language teaching', in Monograph Series on Languages and Linguistics,21, ed. J. Alatis, Georgetown University, Washington, 1968 p.187.

(2) Cf. 'The significance of learners' errors', in IRAL 5, 161-70

strewn, no doubt, with temporary mistakes. If they are frowned on too severely, there may be nothing but passive acceptance (all very well up to a point) of the language supplied. It seems especially desirable that care should be taken not to discourage slower or less alert learners, who are more likely to err. On the other hand, we have to admit that to make a lot of mistakes, and to do so constantly, can itself be very discouraging to the learner.

Just as there is probably a place somewhere in foreign-language learning for all the teaching techniques we know, so there is a place for various teacher attitudes. Mistakes are not to be encouraged, but <u>at times</u> they should not be too strongly discouraged. There are times to be strict about mistakes, for good reasons, and times to be much less strict, for equally good but quite other reasons. For the sake of the foreign-language learner's self-confidence (and especially for the sake of the weaker learner) it is essential to ensure that he is not floundering in error for much of the learning time.

First-language and second-language learners do learn, and have to learn, through making mistakes. Foreign-language learners do not have to learn, to anything like the same extent, in this way. As foreign-language teachers, we should study their mistakes in order better to understand how they are learning and mislearning. We should not seek, but should try to avoid, language-teaching procedures which appear likely to cause them to make mistakes.

W.R. LEE